The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat
Le Secrétariat de la littératie et de la numératie

Ontario

What Works? Research into Practice

A research-into-practice series produced by a partnership between The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and the Ontario Association of Deans of Education

Research Monograph # 7

Poetry: A Powerful Medium for Literacy and Technology Development

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How can teachers tap into the literacy-enhancing power of poetry?

Research Tells Us

- **Poetry awakens our senses, helps us make connections to others, and leads us to think in synthesizing ways, as required by the use of metaphor.**
- **Paying attention to the language and rhythms of poetry helps build oral language skills.**
- **Children with well-developed oral language skills are more likely to have higher achievement in reading and writing.**
- **Creative applications of new media that build on the literacies students have already developed outside of school can help teachers tap into the literacy-enhancing power of poetry.**

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Traditional notions of literacy were once related more or less exclusively to competence in reading and writing. We have expanded these notions to include usage and comprehension skills in speaking, listening, viewing, and representing – by which we mean communicating through a variety of media, including visual art, drama, and multimedia performances. In this context, our definition of literacy extends to fluency in reading and creating electronic media. In a time when the focus is on improving literacy, what role might poetry, a genre that is often marginalized in the English language arts classroom, play in literacy development? How can poetry be taught in ways that engage students, so that we can tap into its literacy-enhancing power?

This monograph discusses poetry's important role in improving literacy skills and suggests a variety of ways to make poetry teaching effective. These include creative applications of new media that build on the literacies students have already developed outside of school through their immersion in digital technologies.

The Transformative Potential of Poetry

Poetry should have a central place in all of our lives, not only for the aesthetic pleasure it affords, but also for its ability to awaken our senses, connect us with ourselves and others, and lead us to think in synthesizing ways, as required by its use of the language of metaphor.[1,2,3] Poetry's conciseness, its brevity, and its power to convey so much in such a limited space is its appeal. Peacock[2] calls poetry "the screen-size art" that provides a "quick dive in a deep pool," offering "depth in a moment, using the depth of a moment" (page 13). Poetry encourages an economy and precision in language that transfers to other types of oral and written communication. Michaels[1] suggests, "Reading and writing poems can help us discover profound truths we didn't realize we knew" (page 3).

Poetry evokes feelings and provokes thoughts about complex social issues.[4] Poetry is more than a vehicle for expression; it is also a way of knowing. Poetry both requires and facilitates a concentration of mind or sustained attention to which our hectic lives have unaccustomed us. The linking of the strange with the familiar through the image or even through well-placed line breaks is perhaps what makes poetry so powerful. Poetry transforms the way we see the commonplace through new perspectives.

October 2007

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Literacy and New Media

- Our definition of literacy extends to fluency in reading and creating electronic media.
- It is important for students to be able to read and write or construct texts in multiple genres.
- The use of new media adds multiple layers of meaning and interpretation of a poem in ways that are not available with a conventional textual format.
- By involving students in performances and discussions, as well as the reading and writing of poetry, teachers can support the multiple goals of literacy development.

The Challenges of Teaching Poetry

Much has been written about the problems associated with teaching poetry.[6,7,8,9] More than other genres, poetry seems to elicit the most groans from students. Often language arts teachers report feeling uncomfortable teaching poetry, either because they aren't sure how to teach it effectively (owing to lack of pedagogical role models), or because they find it elusive themselves.[10]

The dominant model of poetry teaching, particularly for older students, has been to teach poetry through print text and to focus on finding one meaning to be dissected. In contrast, poets emphasize the importance of hearing the poem read aloud (lifting the poem from the page), engaging with it, and probing for deeper meaning through discussion with others.[11] If we want our students to understand how literature, and poetry in particular, brings them to a deeper understanding in life, we need to find meaningful ways to engage them with poetry.

Poetry's Power to Improve Literacy

It is important for students to be able to read and write or construct texts in multiple genres. Moving beyond pen and paper and using a variety of representing strategies (including visual arts or drama, for example) provide students opportunities to express themselves and demonstrate their understanding in alternate ways.

A focus on oral language development through the reading and performing of poetry acknowledges that sound is meaning. When we hear the sound of the words in a poem read aloud, we gain a better understanding of the meaning of the writing. We can involve students in the dramatic exploration of poems in a variety of ways, including choral reading, readers' theatre, dance drama, shared reading, or role play. Such approaches provide opportunities for students to play with the words of a poem and to experience it lifted from the page.

This kind of attention to the language and rhythms of a poem serves to expand oral and written vocabulary. Research tells us that children with well-developed oral skills are more likely to have higher achievement in reading and writing as well.[12,13,14] It also helps evoke a sensorial response to the poem. Students should be encouraged to express the kinds of connections to feelings and senses that they experience, ideally in small or large groups where they can discuss these responses among themselves.

By involving their students in such performances and discussions, as well as in the reading and writing of poetry, teachers can support the multiple goals of literacy development, including making inferences, identifying the main idea, making judgments and drawing conclusions, clarifying and developing points of view, and making connections.

Poetry in a Digital Age

Literacy includes an understanding of how texts are constructed (taking into consideration the author's assumptions, the targeted audience, and the medium used) and how a variety of forms of representation work together to convey meaning. Kress argues that very soon the screen (whether TV, computer, cell phone, or other emerging technology) will govern all of our communication practices.[15] Students will understand language use within an electronic medium. In digital environments, different modes of expression or "modalities" – aural, visual, gestural, spatial, and linguistic – come together in one environment in ways that re-shape the relationship between printed word and image or sound.[16] This change in the materiality of text – that is, the media that are used to create the text – inevitably changes the way we read/receive the text and has important implications for the way we con-truct/write our own texts.

Consider a group of students in an Ontario school who used Corel Presentations to create a Seuss-like poem for a class project. The students combined sound/music, text, and images to synthesize their ideas. In one student's words, not only was the project "fun" but students were able to "see poetry differently" when they created their poems on screen. The use of new media adds multiple layers of meaning and interpretation of a poem in ways that are not available with a conventional textual format.

2008-02703/

Exploring Poetry Through New Media

Our students come to school with literacy experiences and skills that remain largely untapped in the classroom setting.[15,17,18,19] They are accustomed to reading texts that combine image, sound, and words, which are often found in digital spaces that are bound up in social practices. Consider how many hours students log on MSN, MySpace, Facebook, or Runescape. How might we help our students further develop their visual and digital literacy skills to think more critically about how images, sounds, and print text work together to communicate meaning?

Poetry is meant to be lifted from the printed page and explored in multi-modal ways (visually, gesturally, aurally). The use of new digital media for reading, writing, and representing poetry encourages an exploration of the relationship between text and image and how images and sound might be used to mediate meaning-making.

New media have an immersive and performative potential that encourages students to get inside a poem and play with it. Giving students opportunities to create poems or respond to and annotate existing poems using new media provides them with opportunities to use the technology in meaningful ways. Following are two examples of how teachers with even minimal technology skills might use new media to explore poetry:

- Writing hypermedia responses: Students can use HyperStudio4 or the hyperlinking function in PowerPoint or Corel Presentations to create links from key words or phrases in an existing poem or a poem that they have written. Students might create links that take their reader/viewer to a written personal response, to a definition of a poetic convention used in the poem, to an image that the student feels illuminates the poem, to an external link providing an oral reading or biographical information about the poet, or even to a video clip that shows a dramatic performance of the poem. Adding visual or auditory components to poetry opens up new ways of using language and experiencing literature.

- Creating digital poetry: Students can use PhotoStory3 or MovieMaker to create their own digital poems or to represent an existing poem through multimedia. These programs are very simple to use and provide students with simple instructions through the creation process. Students can use scanned or downloaded images or, even better, take their own photos with a digital camera. They organize their images and use the voice recording feature to read the poem aloud. They can add sound effects, a soundtrack of music they have created, or clips of music that come with the program. Most significantly for the study of poetry, these new media allow students to have oral readings linked with their print version of the poem, an approach that honours the multimodal nature of poetry and students' multiple literacies.

Digital Poetry Performance

Poetry – the "screen-size art" – lends itself nicely to the kinds of digital explorations and applications outlined above. The emergence of new technologies allows us to expand our ideas about how poetry might be performed in the classroom. Performance, many would argue, is what is breathing new life into poetry in contemporary society.[20,21] A poem accompanied by visual images and annotations can be seen as a new text, a different way of performing the poem. Creating poetry using new media views performance as a vehicle for exploration and learning, rather than as a fixed product to be rehearsed and delivered as a final event.

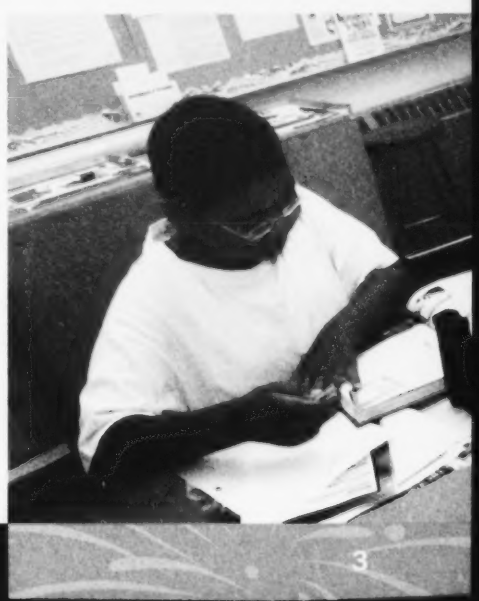
Implications for Practice

New Media Representations

Several examples of poems represented using new media can be found at the author's website.

The site contains video clips and annotations drawn from interviews.

http://faculty.uoit.ca/hughes/Research/poetry.html



Our students are already immersed in new media and the question is no longer whether we should use digital technologies in the classroom, but rather how they are being integrated into the curricula. Although access to resources continues to be an issue, principals need to encourage and support classroom teachers in developing digital skills to improve literacy learning. In addition, teacher preparation programs need to ensure that teacher candidates are fully equipped to integrate new media in a classroom context.

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What Works? is updated monthly and posted at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/whatWorks.html
ISSN 1913-1097 What Works? Research Into Practice (Print)
ISSN 1913-1100 What Works? Research Into Practice (Online)